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Youth and Recreation Branch
Ontario Department of Education

A community council for the arts

Purpose of the council

An arts council should stimulate, encourage and support the development of the visual and performing arts at all levels—from the amateur to the professional. It can provide opportunities for enjoyable, year-round participation in a wide selection of cultural activities. Programs (morning, afternoon and evening) can be organized for all ages, from pre-school to retirement.

Why form a council ?

It is the easiest and best way to provide collective action by community groups interested in the arts.

Creativity, stimulated through the arts, is a liberalizing process. More people are involved. There is a greater impact on the community. Participation in and wider exposure to the arts can excite the imagination, produce increasingly sophisticated projects, and draw out individual creativity. An arts council can lead a community into cultural experiences yet unknown (and unimagined) by local residents. The creation of a knowledgeable and discriminating public will encourage craftsmen and practitioners. Their interest, criticism and selectivity will undoubtedly influence standards.

Creating the council

One interested person or group can spark this collective action. This might be the municipal recreation department, an activity group, a craftsman or a community-minded citizen. Leadership is the key to success, especially when it is the type defined by Field Marshal Montgomery:

The capacity and will to rally men and women to a common purpose, and the character which inspires confidence.

If the municipal recreation authority initiates the project, the director must establish a good relationship with each cultural group. He is in an excellent position to encourage local groups to work towards a common goal. He can talk and listen to individual members and the executives of these groups, and offer to:

- provide secretarial services.
- organize training courses for members and leaders.
- locate better facilities strengthen existing groups and programs by channeling resources to them.
- bring together people with like interests.

An activity group, a craftsman or one interested citizen can also produce results, but may find the task more difficult because of limited resources.

Formation of a council must be preceded by a survey or a study to assess the community's cultural resources.

The survey should:

- evaluate existing groups and their programs, membership, attendance, budgets and facilities.
- assess and list persons available for group leadership, instruction, administration and professional guidance.
- catalog facilities available for classes, joint projects, concerts and exhibitions.
- ascertain opportunities for skill courses, group leadership and executive training and appreciation classes.
- identify needed activities for the various age groups.

During the survey, the various groups should be encouraged to coordinate their programs, and share their resources. It may also be possible to suggest resource material, recommend instructors, obtain better facilities and improve publicity through press, radio and TV. The survey or study itself will stimulate wider interest in cultural activities.

If possible, have the active group members request an initial meeting to discuss closer cooperation and better communication. Plan this first meeting with care. Advertise it widely but invite representatives from all cultural groups, individual craftsmen, recreation personnel, adult educators, librarians, skill instructors—a good cross section of the cultural activities in the community.

The chairman of the municipal recreation committee could chair the meeting. A resource person, preferably one who serves on an arts council in another municipality, could speak to the gathering and outline the type of work the council could perform.

Encourage those present to identify their problems, and list them on a flip board or blackboard. Benefits from cooperating to solve common problems should be pointed out. Depending upon the climate of the meeting and the degree of acceptance for joint action, form small groups to discuss solutions for problems and priorities for action.

If there is a spontaneous decision to form a council, those present should name a steering or executive committee and establish a time schedule to follow. This committee should be given the authority to select

other people to help launch the project. The first slate of officers and sponsors should include members of the community known for their support of the arts or their expertise in financial or public relations matters.

Preparation of a formal constitution, with by-laws and regulations, should be left for one or two seasons, or until the council has achieved recognition.

The steering or executive committee should be given an approximate date to report back to the group. Members of this committee should understand that their recommendations should reflect the wishes of all. People and groups must express and define their own needs and set their own goals. The total group should be involved in the final decisions. Minority opinions should be recorded for future action as the group expands.

Group interests can include:

Dance
ballet, modern, folk, classical, interpretative

Art
sketching, drawing, painting, silk screening, design, textile printing, portrait and art appreciation

Drama
play reading, stock theatre, community theatre, mime, children's theatre, youth theatre

Puppetry
marionettes, glove puppets

Music
orchestral, choral, band, symphony, chamber music, recitals, opera, musicals and music appreciation

Crafts
leather, ceramics, metalcraft, mosaic, small crafts, needlework, rug making, quilting, weaving, carving, model building

Lapidary
rock hounding, mineral clubs

Sculpture
stone, metal, clay

Photography
stills, movies, film making

Flower arranging
miniatures

Reading and speaking groups
literature, poetry, book groups, historical societies, antique collectors, car clubs, museum programs, nature clubs.

Audubon societies

Work for the council

An arts council can be a powerful voice; it can speak on behalf of all cultural interests at the municipal, the regional, and the provincial levels of government. It is a meeting place for the amateur, the hobbyist and the professional, giving more people an understanding and appreciation of the performing and visual arts.

Priorities for the council will vary from community to community. It can:

- act as a consulting body for recreation departments, municipal councils, school authorities and youth serving agencies.
- recruit and train leaders, teachers, demonstrators, consultants and adjudicators for all levels of skill.
- advise on all cultural programs within the school system and within youth groups.
- seek support from commercial, industrial and institutional agencies within the community.
- organize such large-scale projects as an annual showcase and sale, an arts ball, a Christmas sale of crafts, a summer festival, a lecture or concert series, a newsletter, a calendar of events.
- develop such program ideas as public forums, demonstrations, seminars, touring exhibitions, radio and TV shows, discussions, films, scholarships for talented people and club activities.
- provide centralized stenographic, duplicating, poster making publicity and ticket selling services.
- establish a communication centre for the exchange of ideas.
- coordinate fund raising projects.
- present consolidated briefs and requests.
- start a central loan and rental services for such items as costumes, lighting equipment, music stands, stage props.
- investigate bulk purchasing of items in common use.
- administer leadership courses not provided by other community agencies.
- reduce wasteful rivalry.
- market work for local craftsmen.
- plan specialized facilities, such as an art centre, if desirable.
- devise a public education program for arts appreciation.
- seek jobs for professional craftsmen.

How the council should function

An executive committee should direct the council's activities. This committee should give the general membership confidence in its leadership—that it is working for the benefit of the whole and not one particular segment or activity. Sub-committees should be named to handle program, finances and publicity.

The council should encourage effective communication between members and other community organizations, amateur and professional craftsmen, recreationists, the mass media and the general public. Problems that must be faced by the executive committee include cliques, control by one strong group, and public apathy.

Freedom of expression and interpretation must be encouraged by the council. The general membership of all participating groups should be involved in setting goals and standards.

Resources available

Successful community arts councils now exist in Brantford, Ottawa, Kingston and the Lakehead. The program consultants, Youth and Recreation, located at the regional offices of the Department of Education, can put you in touch with these councils, the advisory services provided by the Department and the Ontario Council for the Arts.